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280045Z Jan 05

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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0947
INFO AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000106

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VIETNAM MENNONITE CHURCH PRISONER LE THI HONG LIEN

REF: A) HCMC 86; B) 04 HCMC 1574 and previous; C) 04 Hanoi 2886

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A lengthy interview with the father of Le Thi Hong Lien, one of six Mennonite prisoners, leads us to conclude that claims by overseas NGO's that she was abused and tortured to the point of mental collapse are not supported by available evidence. It seems clear that Lien had a severe breakdown and incidents of police abuse may have occurred during imprisonment after her breakdown. We also cannot rule out that the injuries were self-inflicted. Lien appears to be housed in the prison infirmary and receives at least some basic medical care. In our judgment, this is not a case of organized, willful abuse, but a tragic situation in which lack of resources and understanding -- both on the part of authorities and the parents -- appear to have left a young woman in prison and without appropriate medical care.
End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) A press release circulated on the internet by the California-based Compass Direct dated January 13 alleges that torture and abuse led to the "complete mental and physical breakdown" of a Vietnamese Mennonite woman, Le Thi Hong Lien, 21. The report claims that authorities told her father "she has become the object of prurient interest by prisoners around the infirmary where she is held, because she removes her clothes and staggers around naked when she is unrestrained." The report also alleges that, "prison officials told her father that she was given beatings recently because he had spoken to foreign journalists about her mistreatment." (Note: Lien, along with her spiritual leader Nguyen Hong Quang, was among six Mennonites sentenced on November 12, 2004 for "resisting persons doing official duty," stemming from an altercation with police in March 2004 (refteis). She was sentenced to one year in prison and is due to be released on June 29, 2005. Ref A reports that torture claims by two of the other convicted Mennonites were not credible. End Note.)

The Case of Le Thi Hong Lien

¶3. (SBU) On January 26, PolOff interviewed Le Quang Du (strictly protect), for over two hours about his daughter's case. Du explained that his daughter had been involved in Pastor Quang's Mennonite movement for seven years. Du said that Lien had been arrested twice before in conjunction with her involvement in Pastor Quang's church. In 2000, she was detained for 72 hours; in 2002, for 48 hours. According to her father, she also has had to answer repeated interview summons from police.

¶4. (SBU) Du said that he first visited his daughter in late August at a local women's prison in HCMC, roughly eight weeks after her June 30 arrest. He spent 10 minutes with her. He said his daughter was physically and emotionally well. She said that prison guards treated her well and she had no complaints. Shortly after that visit, Du told us that he was informed that his daughter was transferred to a second prison in HCMC -- Chi Hoa.

¶5. (SBU) Du told us that the next time he saw his daughter was at the trial of the "Mennonite 6" on November 12. He said that her demeanor had completely changed. She was disoriented and did not respond to judges or police instructions. He said that, other than a rash on her face, his daughter appeared physically fine. (Du also noted that all the other Mennonite prisoners looked and acted "normally.")

¶6. (SBU) Du told us that he visited his daughter outside the Chi Hoa infirmary on November 18, six days after the trial for 15

minutes. He said that his daughter cried throughout but otherwise was non-responsive and disoriented. He said that the two female prison guards that accompanied Lien told him that she could no longer control her bodily functions and was difficult to control. They complained to him that they weren't nurses and urged him to get his daughter "to cooperate."

¶17. (SBU) Du said that when he saw Lien on November 18 she had "blood in her eye." There were no other markings on his daughter's face or other signs of abuse. Du said that another member of the Mennonite church told him that a policeman hit his daughter in the face on the return to prison after the trial because his daughter was not responding to his order to sit down. According to her father, the policeman thought that Lien was refusing to obey orders. Du said that after his November 18 visit he contacted the prison duty officer to request that her daughter's prison sentence be cut because of her mental state. The prison official said he had no jurisdiction to do so.

¶18. (SBU) Du next visited his daughter on December 14, again outside the prison infirmary. His daughter had a fresh black eye but no other injuries. She again was unresponsive. He said that prison guards told him that "she had lost her mind," and was a

burden. Du said that he accused prison guards of beating up his daughter, a charge they denied. He said he concluded that the authorities were responsible for the black eye and not another prisoner or Lien herself because a third police official allegedly told him during the visit that Lien is in "this condition" because of Du's had two interviews with Radio Free Asia following his November 18 visit to the prison. Close to Christmas, Du said that by happenstance -- he was delivering supplies to his daughter -- he saw Lien taken out of the prison by ambulance. He did not find out where she was taken, but presumed that she was going for a medical checkup.

¶19. (SBU) Du's latest visit was on January 25. Lien still was unresponsive. He detected no signs of abuse or injury. Lien was accompanied by a Malaysian prisoner (NFI) who told Du that other prisoners in the infirmary had been caring for her. According to Du, prison guards asked him to bring fresh sets of clothes as during Lien's "violent episodes" she would shred her own clothing as well as any other objects she can grab. As a result, prison officials told her father that they had been forced to tie one of her hands to the bed to reduce her mobility. Lien's father said that he had never heard, let alone alleged, that his daughter was in danger of becoming a victim of "prurient interest by prisoners."

¶10. (SBU) Comment: It appears likely that Lien suffered a mental breakdown in prison; we may never learn why. It also is plausible that her two separate black eyes were given by police or prison guards; Vietnamese enforcement authorities are poorly trained and almost certainly not up to the task of handling difficult mentally-ill patients. Based on Lien's reported violent episodes, it is possible that at least one of the injuries could have been self-inflicted. In any case, based on what we have learnt thus far, assertions that torture led to Lien's breakdown and that she was in danger of sexual predation in the infirmary do not appear supportable.

¶11. (SBU) Based on available information, it also is premature to conclude that prison authorities willfully are denying Lien treatment. Lien's father has been able to visit on a regular basis, she appears to be permanently housed in the prison infirmary and the family has bought medicine for Lien at the infirmary's request. This suggests that prison authorities are making at least some effort to deal with a very difficult situation. Moreover, other than his initial discussion with the prison duty officer, Du told us that he never contacted senior prison authorities, the courts or consulted a lawyer to review his daughter's case. Following our meeting, we discussed this case with a senior defense attorney in HCMC. He explained that, under Vietnamese law, Du could and should appeal to prison authorities to remand his daughter for medical care. According to our contact, if and when the doctors agreed that Lien had recovered, she would return to prison to finish her sentence. We passed this recommendation to Pastor Quang's wife, currently our principal contact in the Mennonite Church.

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